

## Duty

Duty is obligation to a higher principle. That principle may be of several kinds—legal, conscience based, business contractual, military command oriented. Immanuel Kant said that the two guiding principles of his life were ‘the moral law within and the starry heavens above.’ These principles constituted for him the area in which Kant believes our sense of duty is inscribed. It is clear that our loyalty to duty can be both to a specific command, and to a general set of principles.

The deepest question about duty seems to be this: does it exist apart from socially generated obligations—doing your duty to what your society thinks valuable—or (as Kant suggests)—does duty reside, in itself, in the nature of things? The moral law within and the starry heavens above incarnate intangible values, and will accordingly not, according to Kant, exist ‘in a specific place,’ although Kant implies that these messages from the skies and the inner self have real world consequences. From these perceptions emerges a broad conception of doing your duty as the area of maximum responsibility for the individual.

The foregoing implies that ‘doing’ your duty’ still bears the noble cachet, the old obligatory flavor it carried in an older and more idealistic culture. ‘Do your duty, son,’ would ring with brio from one bourgeois home to another, as dad exhorted his son to defend the family honor, to ‘build the family savings,’ or to ‘follow the path of Christ,’ all of these acts taken for granted in the course of the good citizen’s daily path. Doing your duty, these days, is likely to mean ‘doing the dishes or taking out the trash,’ but who cares so long as a starry sky and a moral law are to be found in your imagination?